

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE GYANTSE ROAD, SOUTHERN TIBET, MAY 1946

BY

P. I. R. MACLAREN

(With a map)

The Hram Tso and Kala Tso lakes of Tibet lie at an altitude of over 14,500 ft. on the main treaty road to Lhasa. Their ornithology was well described by Frank Ludlow (1927), who was able to study the breeding species while on his way to and from Gyantse, fifty miles north of the lakes. In 1946 leave could only be taken during May, so that it was not possible for the trip described to coincide with the main nesting season; Ludlow's breeding and nidification data are therefore little amplified.

It was however interesting to find that the Kala Tso (14,600 ft), into which the Hram Tso empties, was approximately one-fifth of its size in 1903-1904 when the quarter-inch survey was made, and apparently also of its size when Ludlow knew it. The lake has no outlet and its watershed is small compared to that of the Hram Tso, which receives the drainage of the northern and western slopes of the Chomolarhi range. According to local information the Kala Tso had dried out completely three times since about 1934, always just before the spring thaw in April, and its present (mid-May) depth was estimated as nowhere more than three feet. The big fish for which the lake had been famous were dead, and the salinity of the water increased.

Little aquatic life was found in the lake except at the south-eastern corner in the vicinity of the inflow from the Hram Tso, and at the western end, where a smaller stream enters. It was there that all the duck and most of the Ruddy Sheldrake seen on the lake had congregated. Even fewer of the breeding birds which Ludlow noted as common on the Hram Tso and occurring on the Kala Tso were present on the latter lake, their absence probably being correlated with the lack of food and the shallower water. For example, the colonies of Great Crested Grebes which he describes were no longer in evidence.

On the other hand, numbers of waders (a large proportion recorded only as sparse by Ludlow, Bailey, Kinnear and others) were seen on the brackish pools and mud-flats of the eastern part of the Kala Tso, and less so around the Hram Tso. Though doubtless the majority were stragglers from the spring migration, snipe and avocet certainly gave the impression of being about, to breed.

Marshes lie on the eastern and southern borders of the Hram Tso, stretching in the latter direction some miles from the water. The grassy islands upon which Bailey (1909 a) found large numbers

of Bar-headed Geese nesting occur only along the eastern shore. Mud-flats such as those of the Kala Tso are negligible in size, due to the unchanging water-level, but the narrow muddy strand along the northern, western, and south-western lake-edge provides a considerable feeding area for wading birds. Very conspicuous indeed were the vast hordes of black mosquito-like insects *Chironomidae* which were hatching in countless myriads in the Hram marshes (and to a lesser extent in the south-eastern corner of the Kala Tso) and were blown across the water to form banks inches deep. For a distance of two hundred yards from the lake these insects swarmed in every depression and behind every stone. They stained the smaller pools with their decomposing bodies, while those still alive were stirred up in clouds by passing men and animals. Redshank, stint and avocet were gorging on this feast, though they were only seen to pick up such insects as were floating in the water. Gulls, terns and geese were apparently not attracted.

In his first paper (1927) Ludlow includes also observations of the birds of the Chumbi valley, that area of Southern Tibet which lies between Sikkim and Bhutan. This area has however been considered separately, for it differs in many respects from similar wooded parts of Sikkim, and also a very natural border-line between it and the so-called Tibetan plateau exists at the last trees at about 14,000 ft. above Dotag, just before the bare Phari plain is reached. Accordingly these notes commence there and concern the route up to and including the lakes.

Ludlow's recent paper (1937) is a fuller account of birds seen and collected in the Chumbi valley and more extensively in parts of Tibet and Bhutan further east. As the references he quotes in his first paper are not complete, and some of those of N. B. Kinnear (1922) are misprinted, as full a list as can be traced is given below.

The Political Officer in Sikkim could not permit any shooting, so that the collection of birds about which doubt still exists was unfortunately impossible.

***Corvus corax tibetanus*. Tibetan Raven.**

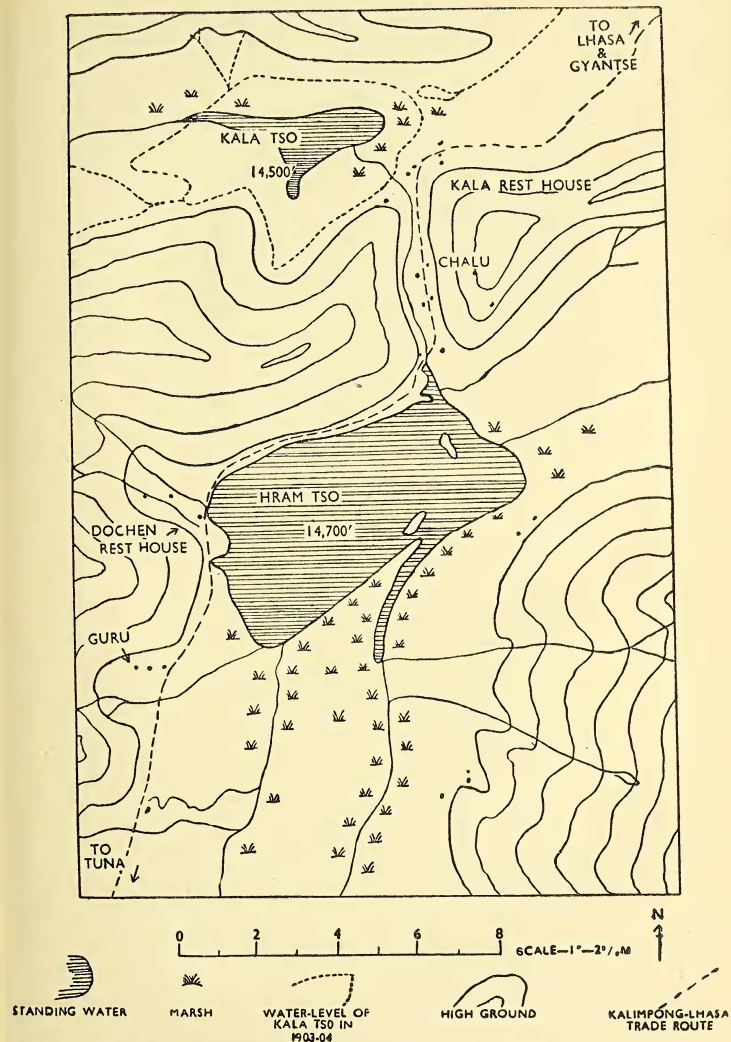
Abundant from Phari to Kala, especially near the villages. An empty nest at Kala from which young may have flown contained several of the reeds wrapped with wool with which the Tibetans adorn their 'mendongs'.

***Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax himalayensis*. Eastern Red-billed Chough.**

Very abundant from the Jelep la up to Kala, mixing with the Jungle Crows in the Chumbi valley, and replacing them thereafter as scavengers. They formed large flocks for feeding purposes, as on the grassier parts around the lakes, but at the same time were nesting. No Yellow-billed Choughs (*P. graculus forsythii*) were seen definitely, although Ludlow thought it might breed in the Chumbi valley. Kinnear recorded the species from higher altitudes than were visited on this occasion.

***Podoces humilis*. Hume's Ground Chough.**

Always in pairs, preferring the sandier hillsides, upon which they were widespread; but also seen on the Phari plain and near the marshes around the lakes. On several occasions they were observed to pick up yak's wool for nesting material.



Diagrammatic sketch of the vicinity of the Hram Tso and Kala, Tso, Southern Tibet.

The traveller expecting to find a chough-like bird will be disappointed, for this species is much the size of a snowfinch, and bears superficial resemblance to a wheatear.

Oenanthe deserti oreophila. Tibetan Desert Chat.

Sparse, only being seen twice, between Tuna and Dochen, and at Kala, after mid-May, though according to Ludlow they arrive in April. Hingston however considers the species a late breeder.

Phoenicurus hodgsoni. Chestnut-breasted Redstart.

Phoenicurus ruiventeris. Eastern Indian Redstart.

Common birds in all the rocky places up to 16,000 feet. These species are so similar that I am doubtful of their relative status.

Ph. erythrogaster grandis. Afghan Redstart.

Only seen in one place, from 15,000 feet to 17,000 feet in the valley west of Dochen. Ludlow considered that it bred above 16,000 feet, as it was absent from Gyantse in summer.

Prunolla rubeculoides. Robin Hedge-Sparrow.

Common from Tunar to Kala, showing a preference for the close-cut marshy tussocks near villages. Frequently flew on to walls and houses, but not seen to carry nesting material. Territorial and courtship display was frequently noticed. A few birds were met with on the northward journey after first leaving the Tromo Chu on 7 May, and were also present on 18 May. Ludlow, in describing the species as very common north of the Tang La, may have inferred that it was sparse elsewhere.

Carpodacus rubicilloides lapersonnei Tibetan Rosefinch.

An isolated male near Dochen on 16 May.

Passer montanus tibetanus. Tibetan Tree-sparrow.

Abundant at every little village and that up to Nala.

Montifringilla nivalis adamsi. Tibetan Snowfinch.

This Snowfinch was only seen at 2 places, both near cliffs; at Guru, and in the valley between the Hram Tso and Kala Tso. The male's threat display includes a bob and fanning of the tail. The large white bar in the wings is even more noticeable than the white outer tail-feathers mentioned in the *Fauna*. Ludlow found it abundant at all elevations between Phari and Gyantse.

Montifringilla taczanowskii. Ashy-necked Snowfinch.

Seen only near the Tang La on 17 May, where males were fighting, and south of Phari on 18 May, where pairs seemed to have established territory. I do not think this species had arrived in this area on 7 and 8 May.

Montifringilla ruficollis. Red-necked Snowfinch.

This species was carrying nesting material near the Tang La on 17 May, and widespread in pairs south of Phari on 18 May. I might have confused this snowfinch with the next on the northward journey, but nevertheless I do not think it had arrived on 7 and 8 May.

Montifringilla blandfordi. Black-throated Snowfinch.

This species was abundant in flocks on the Phari plain on 7 and 8 May, but on the return journey, 17 May, only a few were seen near Shubra below the Tang La. Ludlow thought it a resident at high elevations.

Fringillauda brandti haematopygia. Tibetan Mountain-Finch.

Frequented fields near villages, still in flocks. A few near Phari, and flocks of several hundred west of Dochen.

***Ptyonoprogne rupestris*.** Crag Martin.

Hurried glimpses were obtained near the Hram Tso of what was probably this species, which Ludlow notes as breeding in June and July, and Walton as common in Southern Tibet.

***Motacilla lugubris alboides*.** Hodgson's Pied Wagtail.

Only seen once, near Dochen on 9 May. It may arrive later, as Ludlow describes it as breeding commonly in May and June.

***Motacilla citreola calcarata*.** Hodgson's Yellow-headed Wagtail.

Widespread in wet places, though never abundant as recorded by Ludlow. First met with immediately after leaving the Tromo Chu.

***Otocorys alpestris elwesi*.** Elwes's Horned Lark.

Ludlow says of this species that it breeds near the Hram Tso. I found it one of the most abundant and widespread birds after leaving the Tromo Chu; on the open Tuna plain, near the marshes, and on the hills up to 16,500 feet. They were mostly in pairs and small parties, though on 11 May a big flock of about 300 was noted in the rocky valley west of Dochen. It was however not seen south of Phari on 18 May, and so the birds previously present there may have moved on.

***Melanocorypha maxima*.** Long-billed Calandra Lark.

Sparse in the marshes south of the Hram Tso and those south-east of the Kala Tso though Ludlow only records it for the first locality. Song flight was noticed on 12 May. I think this species must be a strong mimic, as I heard calls of Redshank, Greenshank and Curlew, when no other bird was in sight. Nor did I even see Curlew.

***Alauda arvensis inopinata*.** Tibetan Skylark.

A few pairs were seen near Kala bungalow, and on 18 May it was abundant between Kamparab and the Tromo Chu among the hillside ling, singing lustily. A nest with 1 egg was found on that date. If they were present on 7 May they certainly were not singing, for I observed none on the northward journey. Ludlow found it abundant near Gyantse.

***Calandrella acutirostris*.** Hume's Short-toed Lark.

This lark was first met with on the Phari plain after leaving the Tromo Chu, and thereafter was extremely widespread on the barest plain, in cultivation, and on rocky hillsides. They frequented especially the mule route across the Tuna plain and only bothered to run a few paces out of the way of animals. There was no evidence of their having commenced nesting, although they were definitely paired.

A specimen was picked up and a skin made and identified.

***Upopa epops saturata*.** Tibetan Hoopoe.

A few were seen at Phari and Tuna, and probably had commenced nesting.

***Gyps himalayensis*.** Himalayan Griffon Vulture.

Frequently seen soaring between the Tromo Chu and Kala, but no evidence of breeding was obtained.

***Gypaetus barbatus*.** Himalayan Lämmergeier.

Sparse throughout, but no trace of its breeding. According to Ludlow this occurs in February.

***Falco cherrug*.** Saker Falcon.

Quick views were obtained of falcons near the lakes on two occasions, probably this species. Ludlow records the Saker as occurring in autumn and winter.

***Cerchneis tinnunculus* subsp.** Kestrel.

Occasionally seen near Hram Tso. Considerable doubt exists as to the species and sub-species of Kestrel which occur in this area.

***Haliaeetus leucoryphus*.** Pallas's Fishing Eagle.

Common around both lakes, but not seen fishing. Its call reminded me of a hoarse pekinese barking, and is very similar to the call of the White-tailed Sea Eagle (*H. albicollis*).

***Milvus migrans lineatus*.** Large Indian Kite.

Sparse throughout. No kites were seen that might have been the sub-species *gorinda*.

***Buteo burmanicus*.** Japanese Desert Buzzard.

A buzzard was seen several times around Phari and the lakes which I think I identified correctly as this species. Ludlow was unsure which of the buzzards bred near Gyantse, while Bailey (1909 b) recorded a nest of the Himalayan Rough-legged Buzzard (*Archibuteo hemiptilus*). In a later paper (1911) he cancelled the record as insufficiently proven.

***Columba rupestris turkestanica*.** Turkestan Blue Hill-Pigeon.

From the Tang La to Kala this confiding pigeon was often seen near houses and in fields. Though semi-domesticated, I think many of the birds nest away from houses, as pairs were met with in most rocky and sandy cliffs.

***Syrhaptes tibetanus*.** Tibetan Sandgrouse.

A single bird flying eastwards over the Tuna plain on 17 May was probably of this species. None were seen near the lakes, although Ludlow mentions their occurring there. He may have meant only in winter, as he says the bird is found above 14,000 feet in summer.

***Tetraogallus tibetanus centralis*.** Snowcock.

Two pairs seen, one by Guru, and one west of Dochen.

***Grus nigricollis*.** Black-necked Crane.

Pairs were scattered all over the marsh south and west of the Hram Tso, but only pair east of the Kala Tso. Near the former lake it seemed that each pair had its territory, but had not started to breed.

Larus brunnicephalus Brown-headed Gull.

This gull was common all around the Hram Tso and its marshes, especially on the grassy islands with the terns. A few were seen flying up the river leading to the Kala Tso but none were observed on the lake itself. Ludlow found it common on both lakes.

***Sterna hirundo tibetana*.** Tibetan Tern.

Common around both lakes and seen foraging over all the marshes and side streams. A considerable number were sitting on the northernmost grassy island on the eastern side of the Hram Tso, but shewed no sign of having begun to breed.

***Cirripedasmus mongolus atrifrons*.** Pamirs Lesser Sand-Plover.

Only seen on the shore near Dochen on the Hram Tso, but very abundant on the salty islands and mud-flats of the Kala Tso, where territorial behaviour was noticed. In addition a pair was seen on a 17,000 feet ridge west of Dochen and pairs were quite numerous 3 to 7 miles south-west of Tuna on the bare plain, where one pair was observed chasing Short-toed Larks as though from its territory. Ludlow also found this species on stony plains miles from the lakes.

Recurvirostra a. avocetta. Avocet.

There was a surprising number of these birds on both lakes, though Ludlow only quotes Bailey's record of occurrences in autumn. At the western end of the Hram Tso were 2, and at the north-eastern end a flock of 55, while on the mud-flats of Kala Tso a flock of over 25 was present. There was no obvious pairing off, but occasionally a bird would fly round calling loudly, a note I have never heard from the birds in their winter-quarters.

Glottis nebularia. Greenshank.

On 13 May 1 was on the Kala Tso, and 2 days later 2. Ludlow was uncertain whether it bred and Bailey (1911) records it only in autumn.

Tringa totanus terrignotae. Eastern Redshank.

Very abundant around the Hram Tso, feeding in flocks. Pairs had taken up territory in the marsh south of the lake, and the breeding call was frequently heard. They did not exhibit sufficient alarm to indicate their having nests. It was sparse at the eastern end of the Kala Tso, where only feeding birds were seen.

Eriola temminckii. Temminck's Stint.

This was very abundant around the shores of both lakes in flocks of 10 to 400 birds. At least a thousand were feeding on the mud-flats at the eastern end of the Kala Tso. On only one occasion were 2 seen alone in circumstances pointing to the likelihood of their being about to breed, in the marsh south of Hram Tso on 10 May.

The skin of a bird picked up was identified.

Ludlow says they pass on spring migration in April, but does not mention in what numbers. Wollaston collected birds near Everest in September.

Erolia testacea. Curlew Sandpiper.

One at Kala Tso on 13 May among a flock of Temminck's Stints. A clear view was obtained through a telescope.

Erolia a. alpina. Dunlin.

Three with the Curlew Sandpiper, one being in full summer plumage.

Lobipes lobatus. Red-necked Phalarope.

Two closely observed by telescope among the Temminck's Stints on the Kala mud-flats on 13 May, 1 male and 1 female.

Capella g. gallinago. Fantail Snipe.**Capella stenura.** Pintail Snipe.

Snipe were common in the marsh south of the Hram Tso. No drumming was heard, but only the *chip-chip* breeding note occasionally. They were sufficiently distributed to suggest their having taken up territory. I am uncertain which species was present; possibly the former, as F. Finn in 'How to know the Indian Waders' describes the breeding note of the Fantail as *tchik-tchack* and that of the Pintail as *tiric-tiric*. Ludlow records the former as occurring at Gyantse on both migrations and the latter in autumn only. He does not mention the summer status of either.

Anser indicus. Bar-headed Goose.

Abundant on the Hram Tso and its surrounding marshes, but none seen on the Kala Tso, the absence perhaps being explained by the desiccation and salinity of the lake.

A nest with 5 fresh eggs was found deep in the marsh south of the Hram Tso on 10 May, but the majority had not yet begun breeding, as the birds resting around the lake and on the water were still paired. Bailey (1900 a) had found nesting in full swing on 2 June 1902, on the eastern side of the lake. I inspected the northernmost island through a telescope and saw only a few pairs standing around.